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Voting for Free Trade Instead of Isolation

CAFTA Would Increase Trade, Boost FTAA's Prospects

Trade deals have become an increasingly tough sell in Congress. Foes of open trade blame them for everything from the growing trade deficit to the loss of U.S. jobs overseas. Special interests try to kill them by removing crucial provisions forged in years of painstaking talks. But as the battle over the Central America Free Trade Agreement heats up in Washington, lawmakers should keep in mind that free trade bestows more advantages than the alternative of isolation.

CAFTA would liberalize trade among the United States and six nations close to Florida: The Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. It would put an end to the other nations' import taxes, which could boost sales on a broad range of U.S. products, everything from candy bars to cars. CAFTA would eliminate the few remaining U.S. duties on imports from the six countries. It also puts the United States closer to the prized goal: a Free Trade Area of the Americas.

It's absurd to suggest that CAFTA poses a threat to U.S. workers. Their combined economies, including that of the Dominican Republic, are smaller than that of Connecticut. Even so, these countries buy more U.S. goods than India, Russia and Indonesia combined. This alone merits creating a closer bond to give U.S. exporters greater access to a ready market.

Some arguments against CAFTA have a degree of merit -- labor and environment standards, for example -- but that shouldn't sabotage a good deal. No agreement is perfect. If the United States were to insist on an ideal labor environment in every under-developed country it trades with, U.S. exports would plummet overnight. In Central America, where labor protections already exist -- on paper, anyway -- CAFTA can be used to improve the rights of workers.

CAFTA also provides for a regional environment framework that was established in part with U.S. assistance. As with labor standards, there is a lack of enforcement, but CAFTA can provide the improved resources and training that are sorely lacking.

Nor should disagreements over sugar be allowed to hold CAFTA hostage. It allows 109,000 metric tons of sugar to be imported into the United States the first year after CAFTA goes into effect, gradually increasing after that. U.S. officials estimate this amounts to only 1 ½ teaspoons per week per U.S. citizen. Sugar is a substantial cash crop in Florida, but this hardly amounts to a deal-breaker.

For the people of the CAFTA nations, already feeling the hot breath of Chinese competition, this agreement secures access to their principal external market -- the United

States. Their countries can use CAFTA to attract investment, technology transfers and new jobs.

The latest comments against a hemispheric free-trade alliance by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who belittled its importance, add to the case in favor of CAFTA. Its approval would send a message that if the United States can't negotiate a broad alliance right away, it can achieve the same goal by other means -- with or without Brazil.

For South Florida, CAFTA is an indispensable building block of this greater hemispheric alliance with a possible headquarters in Miami.

For the Bush administration, it's a test of the president's professed support for free trade. With Congress under siege from special interests opposed to free trade, Mr. Bush needs to spend some of his political capital in pursuit of this good cause. In 2000, he promised to make this the Century of the Americas. CAFTA is probably his last and best chance as president to turn that splendid vision into a welcome reality.